DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 031 504 TE 001 515

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A Response to Major Problems in Second-Language Teaching.
Pub Date 68
Note-7p.
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.45
Descriptors-Ability Grouping, *English Instruction, *Grouping (Instructional Purposes), Grouping Procedures, *Heterogeneous Grouping, *Homogeneous Grouping, Language Instruction, Student Grouping, Student Reaction, Teacher Morale

Twenty teachers of English in Iran Girls' College (Tehran) grouped students homogeneously to attack the problem of overcrowded classes of students with diverse abilities and achievement levels. Hopefully, pupils would identify with their groups and strive competitively for greater proficiency in the English language. School personnel and facilities, available class hours, the means of grouping, and the emotional reactions of the students were considered preparatory to the development of guidelines for grouping. It was determined that students would be placed in particular groups on the basis of final grades in previous courses. Also, teachers agreed that it was important for the students to maintain a balance between self-confidence and awareness of weaknesses in language. The results of the experiment, however, were largely unfavorable. Homogeneous grouping appeared to be profitable with advanced groups; but, with less advanced groups, the morale of the teachers and the students was negatively affected and learning was retarded. Perhaps the use of both heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping techniques would effect a better learning situation. (LK)

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ED031504

A RESPONSE TO MAJOR PROBLEMS IN SECOND-LANGUAGE TEACHING

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1967-1968 academic year

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Teachers everywhere complain of overcrowded classrooms and bemoan the difference in academic achievement and the apparent diversity of abilities within a class. These problems are particularly common and persistent in English classes meeting in institutions located in non-English speaking countries. The teachers of such classes may regularly face groups numbering fifty or more; inevitably, they are confronted with vast differences in achievement and ability. The numbers and differences, at times, seem almost overwhelming.

Despite the general awareness of the problems and the many complaints, responses to the problems have been minimal. Few experiments with grouping, sub-grouping, remedial classes or curriculum changes have been carried out; little interest has generally been shown for catering to the individual student.

During the 1967-68 academic year, however, the teachers of English in Iran Girls' College (Tehran, Iran) began to feel that a response to the problems, at least as regards their own situation, was necessary. Herein are described their response and the implementation of that response.

DETERMINING THE TYPE OF RESPONSE

In deciding upon the response appropriate to the problems, the opinion of each of the twenty teachers serving in the Department of English was solicited. The teachers made several proposals, including a reduction in the number of students per class, additional hours of classroom

insturction for each group, and adjustments in the course requirements; but the only suggestion which seemed immediately workable was that which involved the appropriate grouping of the students.

Among the teachers, opinions varied as to the type of grouping that would prove appropriate and beneficial. Some faculty members indicated a preference for heterogeneous grouping, but most of them preferred homogeneous grouping. Several reasons were given for the preference. First, goals and objectives could be stated for each class. Second, the teacher could present the volume of materials believed to be commensurate with the demonstrated abilities of the majority of the class. Third, the teacher could adopt and apply the appropriate teaching methods and techniques. Fourth, students could identify with the group and develop a sense of belonging. Fifth, a spirit of competition could be more easily generated among the members of each group. It was generally believed that as a result of homogeneous grouping, the learning process would be facilitated and greater progress would be made toward the ultimate goal of being able to use English accurately and effectively.

DEVELOPMENT OF GUIDELINES

Having decided upon the appropriate answer to the problems, the next step to be taken was to state certain guidelines for grouping; before a statement could be made, it was necessary to list and consider the relevant factors. Among the factors considered were: the personnel, facilities and time available; the means of grouping; and the emotional reactions of the students.

As to personnel, facilities and time, an estimate was made of the number of teachers, their working hours, the ratio of students to teachers, the number of available rooms and class hours of the students. This estimate was submitted to the College officials for verification, the number of groups needed for the various courses was determined.

The next factor to be considered was the basis on which

the students would be placed in a particular group. Would a student's grade achieved in her previous course be the sole determining element? Would a teacher's subjective evaluation of a students performance be given primary consideration? Would the two be combined, and if so, to what extent would each be weighed? These three questions were posed to each teacher, and a decision was reached. The teachers generally agreed that the grade achieved in any English course greatly reflected the teacher's subjective appraisal of the student. They decided, therefore, that the determining factor for placing a student in a particular group should be the final grade she had achieved in her previous course.

The third important factor to be examined in the development of criteria for grouping was the appraisal of the student's emotional reactions to being placed in a particular group. The teachers generally agreed that it was of the utmost importance that the self-confidence of the student be maintained. At the same time, they felt it was necessary to assist the student in becoming aware of her weaknesses and discovering ways and means of overcoming those weaknesses. Each teacher believed that she should strive to keep a delicate balance between the maintenance of self-confidence and the awakening of the student to difficulties and problems; each one agreed that if one of these elements became too strong, it might result in retardation of learning. Bearing in mind the need to maintain this equilibrium, the teachers set about appraising the probable reactions.

Each teacher observed the behavior of as many of her students as possible within the context of the classroom. She noted the relations of each student with other students who displayed a greater aptitude for learning English; she considered the reactions of each one to unacceptable grades and the interest shown in improving these grades. The data gathered during this informal review of the students seemed to lend support to the idea of homogeneous grouping, for the

review indicated that the balance between the preservation of self-confidence and the development of an awareness of language could best be kept in groups where students were at approximately the same level.

Having gathered the information on the available facilities and instructors and the possible emotional reactions of the students to grouping, and have determined the means by which the grouping would be done, the English Department established several guidelines, including these:

1. The extent to which grouping would be homogeneous would depend upon the available physical facilities and the College schedule.

2. Grouping would be based on formal class grades.

3. Grouping would be flexible, permitting the transfer of a student from one group to another, if the need arose.

GROUPING THE STUDENTS

Grouping the students required several steps. First, the grade of each student was examined and compared with the grades of other students enrolled in the same course. Second, levels of achievement were established, each level corresponding to a letter grade (A,B,C, or D). Third, the total number of students at each level was determined and finally the groups needed were formed.

RESULTS OF GROUPING

Both teachers and administrators expected positive results from the effort at homogeneous grouping. The teachers particularly, as stated earlier, had believed that their efforts at motivation and presentation would be greatly facilitated. Also, they had felt that the students themselves would identify with their groups and, in a spirit of competition, strive for a greater proficiency in the English language. Such, however, was not the case.

The results were largely of a negative nature. The teachers efforts at motivation and presentation were, in many cases, completely frustrated.

Specifically, the results of the effort at grouping the students homogeneously were as follows:

1. Students in the middle and lower-level groups developed a resentment against the English teacher, the English language program and their fellow group members.

2. The students in the lower-level groups began to complain of excessive work and use of poor teaching methods and techniques.

3. A negative spirit of competition developed in many of the lower-level groups. Students began to do as little as possible and became quite apathetic about their lack of accomplishment.

4. An attitude of complete disassociation and disorientation became apparent in some students.

5. Teachers became disenchanted with the unsuccessful classes and tended to take their duties less seriously.

6. The teaching program as it related to the slower groups tended to disintegrate.

IMPLICATIONS

The negative results obtained from the experiment in homogeneous grouping have important implications for programs in English as a second language. First, homogeneous grouping can be profitably used only with more advanced language groups. Second, the psychological stigma associated with being placed in a group composed entirely of less advanced students can retard a student's language progress temporarily, perhaps permanently. Third, the morale of a teacher assigned to a slower group can be terribly affected and the effectiveness of her teaching greatly reduced.

CONCLUSION

Homogeneous grouping appears to be appropriate only in limited instances in programs concerned with English as a second language. In advanced groups it results in a spirit of competition, but in less advanced groups it has the exact opposite effect. It appears, therefore, that the grouping of students in English language programs requires that advanced students be grouped homogeneously and that intermediate and slower students be grouped heterogeneously. If further experimentation supports the findings herein reported, the use of both grouping techniques should effect a better learning situation and greater progress in the language.